Over a cup of tea at Sarabeth’s on the Upper East Side, Sheila Hicks wanted to talk about her scarf. We met on the occasion of new exhibitions dedicated to the 84-year-old textile artist, but Hicks wasn’t keen on discussing the particulars of her artistic process nor the details of her biography—she’d done so, at great length, for the Archives of American Art. Though she’s esteemed for her innovative, thread-based oeuvre, she dodged questions about it.
Hicks’s practice isn’t just about creating objects and installations, but about living a life centered around making. She’s unyielding in her ethics—enduring art and meaningful experiences derive from a conscientious, curious, and ongoing engagement with the material world.

“I’m working very hard to make things that are dignified but joyful.”

When I asked about the light pink and gold fabric draped around her neck, Hicks spoke openly. The scarf’s maker is “a woman who’s called Chiaki Maki,” she told me, “who’s Japanese but lives and works a lot in India.” Maki was an instructor at the Manufacturing and Design Academy of South Africa (Madesa), the school Hicks directed in Cape Town in 2000, by invitation from UNESCO. There, a group of international artists taught locals the necessary skills to make objects they could sell to gain financial independence.

Hicks likes to surround herself with makers like Maki who are “interested in handmade things or...in culture.” Throughout our conversation, Hicks returned to this idea of “culture.” For her, the word connotes a sensibility, regardless of education level, that values awareness and honesty. “Everywhere I go, everybody I know is like me,” she said, adding that such a sensibility is not unusual, but natural, basic. “And the people who don’t get it are somehow disconnected,” she added.

![Installation view of Sheila Hicks, Escalade Beyond Chromatic Lands, 2016–17, at The Bass, 2019. Photo by Zachary Balber. Courtesy of The Bass, Miami Beach.](image)

Miami’s The Bass is currently exhibiting a small retrospective of Hicks’s work, entitled “Campo Abierto (Open Field),” which hints at the artist’s reverence for the handmade. Exhibited objects range from small-scale “minimes,” which she creates on a portable structure akin to a hand
loom; to the massive installation *Escalade Beyond Chromatic Lands* (2016–2017), which Hicks debuted at the 2017 Venice Biennale. Though I didn’t see the original presentation, The Bass’s iteration was one of the most beautiful, impressive artworks I’ve recently seen.

At The Bass, the viewer approaches *Escalade Beyond Chromatic Lands* between two hanging red tapestries; they add a sense of drama, like the scarlet curtains that rise before a theatrical show. Beyond the tapestries, the viewer finds a cascade of colors: marigold at the center, with forest green and orange to the side, dotted with cranberry. Below, cyan and ultramarine spill onto the floor, enhancing the sense of dimensional, unrestrained hues. The piece resembles a giant, overflowing painting—made from supple globes of fabric instead of daubs of oil.

Hicks began her career as a painter—and you can see that in her practice. She translates elements of abstraction, color theory, and painterly gesture into thread, where they perhaps originated. Weavers were making non-representational compositions long before Wassily Kandinsky or Hilma af Klint.

Sheila Hicks with painting at Yale Art School, 1958. Photo by Ernest Boyer.
Hicks’s own experimentations with textiles began while she was studying as an undergraduate at Yale under Josef Albers in the mid-1950s. The famed instructor and Bauhaus member taught her about lettering, basic design, structural organization, and color. And when he saw her working with thread, Albers invited Hicks to his home to meet his wife, the prominent artist and textile master Anni Albers. In Hicks’s version of the story, she enjoyed an epiphany only after she’d left the Albers home and was standing by a bus stop: She realized she could unite Anni’s emphasis on structure with Josef’s principles on color, as she developed her own visual language.

Three other major personalities also inspired Hicks at Yale: art historian George Kubler (an expert on pre-Columbian art); art and architecture historian and critic Vincent Scully; and architect Louis Kahn. “When you go to an art school where the art and architecture and art history departments are all together in the same building, you’re lucky,” Hicks told me. Architecture courses, she noted, help with “raising your consciousness.”


Sheila Hicks organizes an exhibition of tapestries and textile sculptures at the Stedelijk Museum, 1974. Courtesy of the National Archives of the Netherlands.
After finishing her BFA at Yale and before starting the MFA program there, Hicks went to South America on a Fulbright scholarship. After investigating ancient Andean weaving techniques in Chile, she traveled around the continent. She moved to Mexico after finishing her MFA and eventually situated herself among architects: the prominent practitioners Mathias Goeritz and Luis Barragán. “I like the way architects work,” she told me. “They share, brainstorm together.” She now runs her Paris studio in a similar way, she added.

Goeritz helped Hicks land her first teaching position, at the Universidad Autonoma in Mexico City. There, she instructed architecture students on design and color. Meanwhile, she was also caring for her new baby—a daughter named Itaka—and maintaining a home with her husband, a beekeeper named Henrik Tati Schlubach.

Sheila Hicks learning to knot with Rufino Reyes, Mitla, Oaxaca, Mexico, 1961. Photo by Faith Stern.

Living on a Mexican ranch proved to be a life too small for Hicks’s global ambitions. In 1964, she moved permanently to Paris and took Itaka with her. Within two years, she was remarried to a painter, with whom she had a son—Cristobal Zañartu—and a stepdaughter.

The manufacturing company Knoll became one of Hicks’s first major clients. In 1966, their collaboration produced Inca, a nubby fabric inspired by Andean textiles. A German carpet
manufacturer and the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) quickly followed. The resulting piece, *Grand Hieroglyph* (1968), is a wall-sized, cream-colored grid that intermingles blocks of horizontally and vertically threaded fiber and wool with blocks of short weave. Hicks’s titles are always informational. Reading this one, the viewer begins to consider the blocks of fiber as a kind of pictorial language and see the piece not as a decoration, but as a complex story about making.

Another prominent architectural commission came from the Ford Foundation. Hicks created two wall-sized tapestries of intricately-threaded gold discs. She was thinking of beehives and the Foundation’s similarly buzzing, collective spirit. Hicks also made pieces for the Eero Saarinen-designed CBS headquarters, the TWA terminal, and Mexico City’s Camino Real Hotel, designed by architect Ricardo Legoretta.

While such site-specific commissions helped promote Hicks’s artistic profile on a grand scale, some proved to be vulnerable to the whims of designers and developers. As the TWA terminal evolved (it’s now a hotel), Hicks’s work was torn out. A similar fate befell a piece she made in Dallas, Hicks said, for a building designed by Gordon Bunshaft while he worked for Skidmore Owens and Merrill. The piece consisted of four-sided, salvaged, hand-woven wool bands. After it was ripped out of its original setting, the bands were sent back to Hicks’s Paris studio.
“The idea of its monumentality is to envelop you. You’re not thinking about the grains of the sugar—you’re in a huge lemon meringue pie.”

For a forthcoming exhibition at the city’s Nasher Sculpture Center, the artist will once again mount the piece, but in a new configuration. “They’re coming back to roost in Dallas,” Hicks told me. “They were disinherited from the real habitat they were made for, and they’ve been upgraded into the museum.” She describes art as a natural part of a living, architectural ecosystem.

While these large-scale projects are particularly visible, Hicks doesn’t necessarily view them as the core of her practice. At times, she noted, no one’s even bothered to contact her when they remove her work from a building—they don’t consult her or ask if she’d like the piece back. In this way, her smaller works tend to be more lasting. She doesn’t need a commission, or a site, to inspire her.

“I work every day,” she said. Hicks referred to her current show at the New York design gallery Demisch Danant, up through June 8, as a collection of “just things I’m making.” Upon seeing the works, I can say that this is an understatement. These “minimes,” offer a record of incessant making and exploration, weaving together threads, found objects, and materials such as petrified wood, raw silk, razor clam shells, and bits of copper.

Hicks’s concern for her works’ longevity also has to do with a recent interest in biodegradable materials. She believes that, increasingly, makers are considering what they’re leaving behind. She later explained that she’d like to know that if her work disappears one day, that “at least the impression and the memory is strong.” She added, “I’m working very hard to make things that are dignified but joyful.”

Given this, I was surprised to hear Hicks say, during a talk at The Bass, that she doesn’t always sign her work. When I asked her why, she argued with the question. “I said I don’t sign my work. It’s not that I don’t want to sign my work. It’s very different,” she explained. She believes that signing can efface an artwork.

Installation view of “Sheila Hicks: Campo Abierto (Open Field),” at The Bass, 2019. Photo by Zachary Balber. Courtesy of The Bass, Miami Beach.

Architects don’t sign buildings either, she continued, though quickly added that in France, they do. “Remember the plaques on the walls as you go down the street... sort of like a pedigree or
monogram on a building?... We don’t do that around here,” she mused. In the U.S., Hicks noted, buildings aren’t made to last as long as they are in Europe. She lamented the fire at Notre Dame, and wondered how they’ll ever replace the structure—the wood used, during the cathedral’s original construction, derived from the sort of trees that we no longer have access to. Such concerns about legacy and destruction are, perhaps, natural for an artist in her mid-eighties.

Hicks thrives in the competitive contemporary art world, even as she promotes cultural elements that can feel conservative.

The thread of contrarianism that runs through Hicks’s conversation runs through her artwork—or, at least, her conception of her artwork—as well. She’s interested in architecture and design, but she’s neither an architect nor a designer: She’s an artist. She’s deeply invested in the act of making itself, but she’s coy about how she actually constructs her pieces. When I asked about
the making of *Escalade Beyond Chromatic Lands*, the large-scale work now on view at The Bass, I got the Socratic method—teaching by asking questions.

I asked Hicks about what I’d read were referred to as “yarn balls,” the individual, spherical blocks of color that form much of the piece.

“I’m going to be a little provocative,” she responded. “You’ll excuse me if I sound funny but it’s like looking at a drawing and asking me what kind of pencil I use. Looking at a drawing, you want to know if I use a 4H or a 2 whatever, what kind of pencil or pen I’m using or what kind of paper?”

I asked again, “If you don’t call them yarn balls, how do you refer to each individual sphere?” Hicks seemed offended, perhaps, that her work had even been written about in this way. “I’ll give it back to you, okay?” she said. “When you write poetry, how many periods do you use?”

I eventually gave in “So, you don’t like to talk about how your things are made.”


In response, she told me that *Escalade Beyond Chromatic Lands* “is not a construction of yarn balls. It’s a creation of an environment...Did you walk in and hear acoustically, how it changed...
when you approached it?” she asked. “Sight, tactility, acoustical, sensuality, abundance. There are light and shadows, all the time changing...The idea of its monumentality is to envelop you so...you’re not thinking about the grains of the sugar. You’re into a very big meringue, like a huge lemon meringue pie.” It was profound, if indirect.

I was surprised at Hicks’s own hedging, and her edge, given my own experience of her truly joyful work. Her art relishes in sumptuous, unequivocal beauty; her keen sense of color, and her works’ rich texture, are timeless. Looking around The Bass, not a single piece seemed outdated, or even of a different era. By transcending fleeting art fads, and removing herself from a New York art world fixated on speed and the next big thing, Hicks thrives in the competitive contemporary art world, even as she promotes cultural elements that can feel conservative.

“Do you cook?” she asked me.

“No,” I said.

“Do you garden?”
“No.”

“Do you sew?”

“No.” I blushed, unsure how to justify myself and suddenly reconsidering my life choices. “Well, you see,” Hicks said, “all that’s gone.” And with those three simple questions, she appeared satisfied. According to Hicks, living an honest, mindful life requires a devotion to making; and by deprioritizing such “slow” skills, we lose opportunities for richness and beauty.